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Book reviews

E. Milka, *Mortuary differentiation and social structure in the Middle Helladic Argolid, 2000–1500 B.C.*, Oxford: Archaeopress 2023. xxiii+393 pp., 203 figs, 129 charts, 149 tables. ISBN 978-1-78969-625-7.

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People in the prehistoric Aegean treated dead members of a community in many varied ways. The mosaic of shifting habits is especially interesting in situations when the deceased remained physically integrated into the social fabric by being buried inside the settlement, near or perhaps even inside the houses where they once lived. This phenomenon of intramural burials, common during much of the Middle Helladic period (c. 2100–1700/1680 BC) on the southern and central Greek mainland, is the main focus of Eleni Milka's detailed study of mortuary differentiation at three settlements in the north-east Peloponnese. The book is a minimally reworked version of Milka's (2019) PhD thesis with the same title and part of the project 'Shifting identities: Social change and cultural interaction in the Middle Helladic Argolid, 2000–1500 BC', led by Sofia Voutsaki at the University of Groningen.

The aim of the study is to identify overarching principles that may have guided the mortuary patterning on a local and regional level over time. It is a study about the roles available to the inhabitants to articulate personhood at various stages in life. To this end, Milka singles out kinship and descent, age, gender and wealth as important parameters to evaluate. She does so by a careful analysis of mortuary data from intramural and extramural cemeteries at Lerna, Asine and Argos on or near the Argive Plain. The dataset consists of 489 burials containing the remains of a minimum of 520 individuals, occasionally accompanied with grave goods. The data has been gathered by various scholars over the past century, but with many previously unknown or only recently published results. Milka especially acknowledges work by Carol Zerner, Gullög Nordquist, Gilles Touchais, Anna Philippa-Tou-

chais, Sevi Triantaphyllou and Anne Ingvarsson-Sundström in this endeavour.

After an introduction (pp. xv–xxiii) that outlines the basic characteristics of the Middle Helladic period and summarizes past approaches in mortuary studies, three chapters (pp. 1–289) present and discuss the data from the settlements, while a fourth (pp. 290–292) summarizes the most pertinent results. The variables used to analyse the mortuary data include location and clustering of graves in relation to each other and previous or contemporary domestic architecture, orientation of the graves, grave types, possible grave markers, composition and placement of grave goods, biological age estimates and sex determinations of the interred persons, their body and arm positions, health status, as well as diet in life as inferred from a limited number of isotope analyses. Six useful appendices list all graves, stray human bones that cannot be assigned to any particular grave, the body position and orientation of the skeletons, and both pottery and non-pottery grave finds.

With few exceptions, Middle Helladic burials are unassuming in their material expressions and consist almost exclusively of interments in pits, cists or jars. They are difficult to date when lacking chronologically sensitive grave offerings, and only in a handful of instances are there radiocarbon dates to independently confirm or supplement a tentative sequencing. When dates can be added as a parameter to address change over time, subtle but potentially meaningful patterns nevertheless emerge. Practices also differ slightly in emphasis between the cemeteries under investigation. The large number of parameters compared over time at three intramural cemeteries (Lerna, Kastraki at Asine, and the Aspis at Argos) and an equal number of extramural cemeteries (Myloi near Lerna and the Eastern Cemetery and Barbouna at Asine) produce a wealth of data that is presented in no fewer than 129 bar charts and 149 tables throughout the study. While the interpretations of inevitable variations and their significance are bound to differ between scholars, the data is a treasure trove of lasting significance.

The 220 graves at Lerna represent the largest corpus from the Argolid (pp. 1–105). Interestingly, Milka recognizes seven groups above or around free-standing houses in the better-documented eastern portion of the settlement. From late Middle Helladic I to Middle Helladic III, individual house plots in the area oscillated between habitation and burials. While the practice of burying children inside or near buildings still in use is attested, it is likely that most graves were placed upon or next to recently abandoned houses. At the beginning of the Late Helladic I period, the central portion of the excavated area appears to have been used exclusively for burials, most notably the two shaft graves (which are not included in the study). Milka plausibly argues that kinship appears to have been the main principle of differentiation in the structuring of mortuary space at the settlement. Towards the end of the Middle Helladic period, an extramural cemetery was established to the north at Myloi (pp. 106–116), where primarily adults seem to have been buried.

Across the Argive Gulf at Asine, Middle Helladic graves have been documented on the terraces and in the so-called Lower Town on the north side of the rocky Kastraki promontory (pp. 132–194), in the extramural East Cemetery, roughly 200 m east of the Lower Town (pp. 194–230), and on the lowermost south-east slope of the Barbouna hill (pp. 230–260). Contrary to interpretations in the past, Milka convincingly argues that the remains in the Lower Town and Barbouna were part of the same continuous intramural mortuary space. Radiocarbon dates and a recent reanalysis of the graves in the East Cemetery tumulus are conveniently summarized. Milka proposes a slightly higher emphasis on age position in kin networks (Lower Town and Barbouna) and on common descent (East Cemetery) at Asine than at Lerna.

Among the Middle Helladic cemeteries known from Argos, only the intramural ones from the south-east sector of the Aspis summit are included in the study (pp. 272–289). The 101 known graves from the North Sector, questionably interpreted as deriving from five tumuli by Protonotariou-Deilaki (1980), will instead appear in a separate study and are only briefly reviewed (pp. 266–270). The small burial sample analysed dates exclusively from Middle Helladic III and is, somewhat surprisingly, dominated by adults in pit graves.

Overall, gender and wealth differences between individuals were never pronounced in the mortuary data included in the study. It is occasionally possible to isolate what appear to be significant variations in the treatment of women and men within individual clusters of graves, but they are either nuanced or even contradicted in the next cluster. With a very modest start in Middle Helladic II and a slight increase at the transition to the Late Helladic I period, a handful of individuals received moderately more elaborate cist graves and/or were buried with grave goods that may suggest asymmetrical access to tangible resources. The two late Late Helladic I shaft graves

at Lerna could not be included in the analysis, but their final publication will show how exceptional they are in this regard. It is likely that they were part of a political dialogue with elite groups at contemporary Mycenae rather than representative of normal traditions at the settlement.

Instead, Milka argues that age and probably also kinship and descent were the prime structuring principles of everyday social life. Subadults, especially neonates and children, are, for instance, overrepresented in unfurnished pit graves, while adults were more likely to be buried in extramural cemeteries. The clustering of graves with persons of different age groups upon recently abandoned houses is difficult to interpret as anything but a desire to reaffirm affiliation to certain families or lineages. These suggestions are not new but are now based on a more solid footing than ever before.

It is a challenge to present the large dataset and numerous variables in a way that allows trends emerge. The large number of bar charts and tables serve to illustrate variations between, e.g., cemeteries, grave groups, age groups, biological sex and periods. It is possible, or even likely, that a judicious use of correspondence analysis would have aided both the author and the reader in further uncovering, or at least graphically illustrating, possible relationships between multiple variables. It could relatively easily also be complemented with chi-squared tests to establish the degree of independence of different variables. On several occasions, I found myself asking if observed variations between relatively small grave groups are significant or random and would have benefited from some guidance.

There are some misspellings and editorial mistakes and a few unnecessary duplications of illustrations showing arm positions of skeletons, but these minor flaws will not irritate the reader. Rather more unfortunate, the volume lacks a list of abbreviations and an index that would have facilitated the reading experience significantly. None of these issues, however, reduce the significance of Milka's study. Not all scholars will agree on relative dates of single graves, age and sex determinations of buried individuals, or the correct isolation of grave groups in relation to domestic architecture, but the principal results can hardly be contested. The wealth of data, conveniently assembled and judiciously synthesized, is a welcome addition to anyone interested in social dynamics in the Aegean Bronze Age.

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